

Introduction

Swimming can be a dangerous activity. Programs should either avoid swimming with participants entirely or offer swimming only with trained staff present and thorough plans for how to keep students safe. Consider the following statistics from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention:

- Among children ages 1-14, fatal drowning remains the second-leading cause of unintentional injury-related death behind motor vehicle crashes.
- The highest risk categories for drowning are males, children, and minorities.
- African American children ages 11-12 years drown in swimming pools at 10 times the rate of white children.
- 79% of children in households with incomes less than \$50,000 have few-to-no swimming skills.

Programs that decide to take participants swimming must do so with hyper-vigilance of the risk it involves. You would not let students engage in other high-risk activities, like rock-climbing or sailing, without staff training, safe equipment, and skilled supervision. Do not let your participants go swimming without the same level of attention to safety.

Overview

To help ensure the safety of your students when swimming, here are some basic guidelines and further resources. Please do not rely just on this resource to ensure a safe swimming environment; refer to additional American Red Cross resources and/or talk with your local swimming facility to ensure that you are providing safe swimming opportunities for your students.

- Understand the risk factors
- Select safe location and conduct a safety scan
- Get written parent consent
- Use a lifeguard
- Train all staff
- Swim test participants and set limits
- Set and explain rules to participants
- Use a buddy system
- Count and track participants

Understand the Risk Factors

Risks for the SEA Population

Drowning is a leading cause of death in children, and is even more deadly for children from low-income families. Consider the following factors that increase the level of danger for children when it comes to swimming.

- **Lack of swimming experience:** Factors such as lack of access to swimming pools and swimming lessons make low-income populations especially vulnerable to drowning. Children do not naturally know how to swim.
- **Impulsivity:** Youth and teenagers can be impulsive and feel invincible. They take risks without considering the consequences of their actions. Even if they know they cannot swim, they may jump in the pool not considering the consequence.
- **Peer Influence:** Youth and teenagers want to be with their friends, not sitting out on the side. If they see their friends swimming, they will be even more inclined to try to swim along with them, even if they do not know how to swim.

Drowning Risks

Drowning is a deceptively quiet event; it does not look like it does in the movies. People do not splash around yelling for help. They panic and sink, quietly and often unseen. Consider the following factors about drowning. It takes about:

- 10 seconds to submerge underwater
- 2 minutes to lose consciousness
- 4-6 minutes for permanent brain damage

Without a trained, focused lifeguard scanning the water constantly, an inexperienced swimmer can easily sink unseen and drown in a matter of minutes.

Select Safe Location and Conduct a Safety Scan

Location Selection: Choose to swim in places that have trained lifeguards, as opposed to bringing your own lifeguard, whenever possible. Locations with their own lifeguards have already conducted significant staff trainings, are familiar with the risks and environment, and have systems and procedures in place to ensure safety. Don't take it upon yourself to become an expert in the area of water safety in a new location.

Safety Scan: Conduct a safety scan of the area before allowing students to swim. Identify areas of concern (drains, suction fittings, rocks, etc.) as well as safety supports (flotation devices, first aid kits, phones, etc.). Have appropriate equipment nearby such as throwing equipment, a phone, a first aid kit, and US Coast Guard approved life jackets.

Get Written Parent Consent

Inform parents/guardians in advance of the swimming situation (location, lifeguard present, etc.), and get written consent from them saying that their child can swim and has

permission to swim at your event. Create and share a “Do not swim” list with all staff, and ensure that students on the “Do not swim” list do not go anywhere near the water.

Use a Lifeguard

Never take participants swimming without a lifeguard. This includes at hotels, pool parties, lakes, etc. It is dangerous and irresponsible - the equivalent of letting someone without a driver’s license drive your participants. Do not assume this risk, and do not subject your students to this level of risk. When using a lifeguard:

- Ensure that the lifeguard's only responsibility is to watch the water.** Lifeguards should not, for example, help a student put on a life jacket, answer questions, manage out-of-pool behavior concerns, etc. Other staff should fulfill these responsibilities.
- Check state and local health codes to ascertain the require ratio lifeguards to swimmers.
- Ensure that lifeguards take a 15-minute break at least once an hour.
- Ensure that lifeguards are familiar with the swimming facility. In advance of students swimming, they should look at the swimming area to identify potential hazards (rocks, deep water, etc.) and locate safety equipment (emergency phones, life vests, etc.).

Train All Staff

Train all staff, not just lifeguards, in protocols to keep students safe. Non-lifeguard staff need to clearly understand their role and the environment when participants are swimming. Non-lifeguard staff should:

- Ensure the lifeguard is not distracted by other responsibilities and is able to keep his/her attention solely on scanning the water
- Be familiar with the facility in advance (locker rooms, emergency phones, potential hazards, etc.), and
- Know and enforce the rules (no running, no rough housing, etc.)
- Actively supervise participants - answer questions, ensure they are being safe, address behavioral concerns, etc.

Swim Test Participants and Set Limits

Before allowing participants to swim, conduct swim tests and limit where participants can go based on their ability level. Inexperienced, weak swimmers should only swim in very shallow water unless accompanied in the water by a lifeguard and/or a flotation device. Use US Coast Guard approved life jackets for inexperienced and weak swimmers.

Set and Explain Rules to Participants

Establish and clearly explain rules (in multiple languages if needed) before allowing children to swim. Some common rules include no running, no playing around drains and suction fittings, no pushing others into the pool or holding others under water, no rough-housing, etc.

Use a Buddy System

Have children identify a buddy that they will stay with and keep track of the entire time they are in the pool together. Conduct “buddy checks” from time to time to make sure everyone is safe and with their buddy.

Count and Track Participants

Know exactly how many students are present at all times. Participants should sign in and out of the swimming area with a staff member who is keeping track of the number of participants present. This staff member should be scanning the water and facility as well, counting students every five minutes to ensure everyone is safe.

Additional Resources

- ❑ [American Red Cross Water Safety Guidance](#)
- ❑ [Lifeguard Management](#) - Information from the American Red Cross on how to ensure participants are supervised by a well-trained staff
- ❑ [Drowning Doesn't Look Like Drowning](#)
- ❑ [Swimming and Drowning \(and How Drowning Doesn't Look Like Drowning\)](#)

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